

HOW TO...

Remove blemishes from photos

Is that mark on your auntie's nose spoiling your favourite photo? **Xavier Cortez** explains how to banish unsightly parts of any picture

If your photos are in digital form they are very versatile. You can email them, put them on a website, create a DVD slideshow and back them up as many times as you like. It also makes them ripe for manipulation. Many photos benefit from careful cropping or colour correction. Some can be improved further with digital airbrushing. Litter, telegraph poles and other people can spoil an otherwise beautifully composed picture.

Image-editing software makes it easy to remove such blemishes. And your loved ones will be delighted to be captured without any sign of spots, wrinkles or bits of food hanging from their chin.

1 Image-editing software such as Paint Shop Pro, PhotoImpact and Photoshop Elements include a Clone tool that lets you select an area of an image and clone it to another area. In Photoshop Elements, select the Clone Stamp tool (with a rubber stamp icon) from the Tools window. Hold down the Alt key and click a part of the image you want to use as the source for your clone. Click on the unwanted part of the image and move the mouse to graft the image across. You might find you need to select different areas as your source to cover the offending area in a way that looks natural. Experiment with different brush sizes too to get the most effective results.

2 The Clone Stamp tool may be all you need, but sometimes it isn't subtle enough and the grafted part of the image doesn't line up properly, is the wrong colour or resembles the source part of the image too much. In these situations, a manual cloning technique gives more control. To show the Layers palette, click Window, Layers and resize it as necessary. Select the Lasso Tool and drag the mouse around an area of the image you want as your source for the manual clone. Cut out more than you need as you'll be trimming it to size later. Type Ctrl-C to copy and Ctrl-V to paste, select the Move tool (at the top-right of the Tools windows) and drag it to its new location, lining up the edges so it looks as convincing as possible.

3 Select the Eraser Tool (with the rubber icon), choose a large brush with a soft edge and erase any conspicuous edges to

the layer you've just pasted. Try to work around any obvious shapes, such as the crests of waves in our picture, blending the two layers in less eventful parts of the picture. You might also find different brush sizes work better for different areas, so complex patterns such as pebbles require a smaller brush to avoid an obvious smudge. Repeat Steps 2 and 3 if a single cloned layer doesn't fit its new position perfectly. Click the Background layer on the Layers palette before selecting a new area to copy.

4 You can rotate, skew and flip the layer you've copied so it lines up better with the original image. This is useful if you've cloned a large area of the image and the repetition is visible, making the photo look doctored. Type Ctrl-T to enter Free Transform mode. You can resize it using the handles at the corners and edges. Hold down Ctrl and drag the handles to skew it or click outside the box to rotate it.

5 You'll sometimes find that the colour of your grafted area doesn't match its new background. This is particularly true of smooth areas such as walls that aren't evenly lit. The best technique is to find a source area that matches the shade of its new surroundings best. If this isn't possible, you can usually fix the problem with colour-correction tools. Select the layer you want to adjust in the Layers palette and click Enhance, Adjust Brightness/Contrast, Brightness/Contrast. Experiment with the sliders until you find the setting that works best. You might also want to try the Hue/Saturation filter, which you'll find under Enhance, Adjust Color.

6 If you're a real perfectionist – or if an edit is particularly troublesome – then you should try matching the shades of the cloned area with its background using the Dodge and Burn tools. Dodge (which has an icon that looks like a black lollipop) lightens an area, while

Burn (a clasped hand icon) darkens it. But unlike the Brightness/Contrast filter, these tools are applied using a brush. Select a large brush size with a soft edge and reduce the Exposure to around 20 per cent for a subtle effect. Extend the background layer's contours of light and dark across the cloned layers. 

TOP TIP
To keep track of layers in the Layers palette, double-click their names to rename them. Alternatively, type Ctrl-E to merge a layer with the one underneath.

